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Heartbreaking News

Paris, France: A city where those in search of love, opportunity, and liberation go, seeking the life that they have always dreamed of. The tree-lined streets, bustling sidewalk cafes, picturesque buildings, and the peaceful lifestyle unique to Paris are what draw so many to this historical city. Both young and old come for new beginnings and to carry out the life that they have always desired. This is what caused me, Bridget Anne Driscoll, to give up my comfortable life in my hometown of London, to come to Paris to live my dream of studying at the Sorbonne University.

Walking the streets of Paris every summer while visiting my French grandmother, I saw the place that I knew I belonged. I saw a city full of life, history, and pleasure, as the people of Paris go about their lives in a way unlike any other city in the world. Sipping espresso at the outdoor cafes, walking carefree along the Champs-Elysees, and living in the shadow of the striking Eiffel Tower was a sample of a life that I had always dreamed of. Though I had been perfectly content living in London, I sought new opportunities and freedom in The City of Light, and when my acceptance letter to the renowned Sorbonne University arrived in the post, I knew my time had come. I had been accepted into CELSA, the information and communication school of the Sorbonne where I would be carrying out my lifelong aspiration: the study of journalism.

Since I was young, the *thump* of the daily post arriving on our doorstep always brought about a great deal of joy in me. Reading the pages of *The Times* and learning of the endless happenings around the globe created a constant sense of excitement and wonder. The aroma of the warm paper and black ink hot off the presses reminded me that every morning a small parcel of history was being dropped on my doorstep, awaiting it’s time to be viewed by the millions of loyal readers. *The Times* provided for me a window into the lives of the Royal Family, the individuals whom the people of Britain relish over. Their esteemed faces plastered over the pages, as stories ranging from politics to their personal lives accompanied the images. However, the figure of the most fascination and interest to me was that of Princess Diana. Following her marriage with Prince Charles, she dominated the media and every day I awaited the latest article about the social gatherings she attended, her philanthropic work, or her latest achievement in modernizing the way in which the Royal Family was viewed. She became a part of everyone’s life because of the media, and with her great influence, I would soon be joining that very world.

It was August 30, and I had just arrived in Paris, ready to start a new chapter of my life. Driving through the Arc de Triomphe and along the Champs Elysees, I saw the entire city sprawled out before me, as the calm waters of the Seine divided the city into its two banks. Despite the cloudy skies and the slight drizzle beating down on the cab’s windows, Paris had never looked more illumined, as I saw opportunity intertwined within the scenic architecture of the city. As I crossed the Seine to the Left Bank and toured the grounds of Sorbonne University, I took in the scenic campus that would be my new home for the next few years. The immense domed halls and beautifully crafted buildings stood upon the school’s original thirteenth century grounds, emitting knowledge and wisdom to all of those that strolled about the campus. Students were present throughout, studying and socializing with friends, or lounging in the manicured lawns of the Jardin du Luxembourg a block away.

While getting familiar with the campus, I spotted my new roommate Elodie climbing the steps up to the library. We had met earlier in the summer during orientation and realized that we both would be staying at the Ritz Hotel until the start of term. Elodie was also British but had spent the majority of her childhood living in Marseilles. Like me she was alone in the city, and had no family or close friends to help her adjust to the new life. I was thankful to see her, as although we were not fully acquainted yet, it was comforting to know that there was a friendly face in the same situation as me.

“Elodie! Elodie!” I called after her, unfazed by the turning heads and odd stares that I was getting because of my exclamation.

Elodie paused mid-step and turned, searching for the individual responsible for calling her name. When her wandering eyes landed upon me, a warm smile spread across her face as she rushed forward to greet me with a tight hug.

“Bridget! You have no idea how happy I am to see you! How are you? How was the rest of your holiday? When did you arrive?” Her words came out in a rush, as I sensed her joy and relief to no longer have to wander about Paris alone.

Both thankful to now have a friend to spend time with, we decided to spend the rest of the afternoon together, travelling around Paris, shopping in the many boutiques, dining in the various cafés, and walking down the many charming roads getting better acquainted with one another. Following a late dinner, we took advantage of the end of summer night life in the city. The skies had cleared, and despite the slight wind, the sidewalks were still buzzing with people. We walked the streets chatting about the year to come, as the Eiffel Tower twinkled off in the distance, giving the night a surreal and faraway sensation.

At last Elodie and I made our way back to the Ritz where we decided we would take a small rest before heading back out for our very first night in Paris. We both wanted to experience the city as much as possible before the fall term started, as we knew our time would then be jeopardized by our studies. As we approached the hotel, we saw a large group of people surrounding the main doors. Drawing nearer it became clear that the men were all photographers, holding large cameras and murmuring quietly to one another as they perched themselves on their motorcycles, awaiting the emergence of an unknown individual. We made our way past the photographers and entered the luxurious lobby of the Ritz. The vast room was abuzz as people stood with their mouths agape, while others chattered excitedly with those they were standing with, clearly star struck by the sight of whomever it was the photographers were awaiting. From where Elodie and I stood, all we could make out of the mysterious celebrities was the short, strawberry blonde hair of a woman in a black blazer, being ushered quickly away by three burly men wearing neatly tailored suits. As they exited the hotel I could hear the photographers’ booming voices and see the bright flashes of their cameras, for they had finally seen the people they had been waiting for emerge from the hotel.

“Over here! Over here!”

“Tell us! How did you spend your day here in Paris?”

“This way! This way! Over here!”

Despite their efforts, the photographers were unsuccessful at attracting the woman’s attention. She ducked quickly into the backseat of the black Mercedes parked in front of the hotel, and in just seconds the car was speeding out of sight.

Elodie and I looked at one another, unsure of what had just unfolded before our eyes. We were in a state of confusion, curious to know which notorious celebrities had just graced the lobby of the Ritz. Judging from the reactions of the other individuals standing in the lobby, it was an immense occasion, for many celebrities are known to have stayed at the Ritz, though none seem to have elicited such a response. No longer did we wish to rest alone in our rooms, as we were reenergized by our interest and wonder. Together we exited the hotel and again walked out into the breezy night air.

“Well,” I said, looking around at the crowded streets. I was now restless, but my unfamiliarity with the city made me unsure of what our next move would be. “What shall we do now?”

Elodie looked around at our surroundings before eventually pointing to the empty taxi parked across from the hotel. “Let’s take that cab over there to a café for dessert. I know a lovely one from when I would visit in the summer. It’s right on the Seine and should still be open!”

Pleased at this idea, I nodded with consent, and we made our way across the street to the taxi.

“Place de l’Alma, s’il vous plait,” Elodie directed the driver as we settled into the black cushioned seats of the taxi. Though the clock in the cab read 12:24 a.m., I felt no fatigue, but rather a flurry of enthusiasm and spontaneity for our late-night adventure.

The car sped away as visions of the rustic buildings outside rushed past the windows. It seemed as though we were taking a shortcut to the square as the driver made a sharp turn off of the main avenue and began winding in and out of smaller side streets. Within minutes though, we arrived at the square. The Seine was sparkling in the moonlight and people were still out on the streets despite the late hour. We thanked out driver with a quick, “Merci,” gave him the correct amount of Euros, and seated ourselves at a table at Elodie’s favorite café.

After ordering an array of French desserts for ourselves, we looked out to see the panorama of the city that our table offered. The view was breathtaking and exactly what Paris is thought of to be. Roadways lined with bright green trees, magnificent architecture rising up into a stunning skyline, and people stirring about regardless of the hour was the picture that I would be seeing now every day. I was snapped out of my reverie immediately however, when I saw a black sedan speeding up the road. It appeared to be going well above the speed limit and was swerving as it dipped down into the tunnel that runs underneath the Place de l’Alma square. Following closely behind it I could hear the *vroom* of seven men on motorcycles in pursuit of the car, some shooting flash guns attempting to capture any image of the car ahead. Within seconds though, they too had disappeared into the tunnel.

Elodie and I looked at one another in confusion, for the sight that we had just observed was evidently unusual; however we were not prepared for what was soon to follow it. The entire square stood at a standstill as we all heard perhaps the most heart wrenching and devastating of sounds. The screeching of the tires on the road as the car attempted the brake, quickly followed by the deafening noise of smashing metal. Echoing off of the tunnel walls the noise was crystal clear to all of those about the square. Though as quickly as the sounds of the crash had come about, did the silence arrive in an overwhelming wave. Everyone stood motionless. No longer nibbling on their croissants and gateaux du chocolat, or sipping their tea. The conversations had ceased, and everyone stood shocked and overwhelmed by the happening that had just occurred.

Elodie and I locked eyes, clearly thinking the exact same thought. Her eyes were wide, her mouth tense and worried, and I knew that I must have an expression identical to hers.

“Was that the…?” I began, unable to finish my sentence due to my shock and disbelief to what I had just witnessed.

“I... I.. .I think so… The motorcycles. It had to be… But no, it just couldn’t …” Elodie uttered, not wanting to believe that the Mercedes that sped away with the mysterious celebrities we saw at the Ritz was the one that had just crashed in the tunnel.

However as we sat there, paralyzed by the devastation that had just taken place, I knew that Elodie and my assumptions were correct. The motorcycles that were in pursuit of the car had been those of the photographers that were awaiting the emergence of the unknown celebrities from the hotel. The black Mercedes that drove away from the Ritz immediately after was indeed the one that had just crashed in the Place de l’Alma tunnel; through which Elodie and I were able to witness due to the efficiency of our cab driver’s shortcut. I was lost in this realization, a mix of emotions encompassing me as I sat not wanting to believe that I had seen the destructive crash of individuals who must have been quite prominent and influential. The screeching sirens of the police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances that arrived minutes later at the scene snapped me out of my thoughts and broke the disheartening silence. The flashing red and white lights overwhelmed the scene and made the situation a true state of emergency. The delicate desserts that sat half-eaten before us now appeared unappetizing, as the taste in my mouth was bitter from watching such a frightening and heartbreaking scene unfold.

Elodie and I left the square immediately after being asked to flee the area by one of the emergency officials. Neither of us wanted to see now who was in the car when it crashed, nor did we wish to be questioned about what took place. It was almost one o’clock in the morning, and the roads were sparse as Elodie and I clambered into the taxi that would take us back to the Ritz. The cab ride back to the hotel was astonishingly quick, as the city rushed by the cab’s window in a blur, while my mind continuously played back the night’s events.

Upon entering the lobby, Elodie and I both sensed the tense atmosphere, only proving that our assumptions had been correct. We saw the manager at the front desk talking exhaustedly on the telephone as we waited for the elevator to arrive. It was clear that he was being questioned about the whereabouts of the individuals who had been involved in the crash, and from what he said, they had dined at the hotel’s restaurant just before leaving.

“Oui, monsieur. Ils ont dȋné à *l’Espadon* et après ils sont partis l’hôtel,” he stated in an almost aggravated tone, as though having to repeat himself multiple times.

When the elevator arrived and took me to the floor of my room, I said good night to Elodie and entered the plush and luxurious suite. The cream colored, French country-style décor should have relaxed me, however the night’s events only made me anxious and worried. My curiosity was just as overwhelming as I turned on the television hoping to see a news report about the crash. The words that then appeared on the screen were enough to make me question whether or not I was actually awake. My emotions intensified as I listened to the horrific words being spoken by the newscaster.

“Breaking news report. Just minutes ago at 12:35 a.m. in the Alma tunnel, located in the Eighth Arrondissement on the Right Bank of the Seine, Princess Diana was involved in a potentially life-threatening car accident. The Princess was accompanied by the Harrods heir, Dodi Al-Fayed, whom she has recently been seeing, along with driver Henri Paul, and a private bodyguard. They were driving back to Al-Fayed’s apartment in the Sixteenth Arrondissement after dining at the Ritz Hotel when the crash occurred.”

My heart dropped. Never would I have imagined that I would witness the death of the woman whom I most greatly admired. Not only had I seen her moments before entering the vehicle that would ultimately lead her to her death, but I had also witnessed her death itself. I felt alone and unable to cope with my emotions. I was holding back tears, attempting to quell the enormous lump in my throat that when released when sent me into a fury of shaking and weeping. There was no one to comfort me, no family or close friends to hold me and tell me that my new life in Paris would get better after such an upsetting start. Sure I had Elodie upstairs, but she did not understand the complexity of this event. Princess Diana was my role model. Her presence in the media and her character inspired my love for journalism. It was her who ultimately brought me here to Paris to pursue my passion, and upon my first night here, she was taken from her carefree and joyous night with her new love, Dodi, to instead be fighting for her life in the Salpetriere Hospital.

**…**

I rose the morning of August 31 feeling numb. It had been a restless night, for my mind had been racing, replaying the evening’s events in my head and trying to become at peace with the upsetting death of Princess Diana’s. Despite the doctor’s many efforts, both she and Dodi passed at four o’clock in the morning from cardiac arrest and internal bleeding caused by the car’s collision with the concrete lane barrier. This unexpected accident created a tense and mournful tone to be felt across Paris, as newspapers throughout the city were covered in pictures of Diana’s smiling face, accompanied by the bone-chilling image of the crushed black Mercedes I had seen parked outside the Ritz and speeding into the Place de l’Alma tunnel.

As I walked around Paris on that warm, clear day alone, I could feel the city grieving and lamenting over the woman who truly captured the hearts of the world. Though they had never even met her, her constant presence in the media and warm smile made people feel as though she were a part of their household.

I wandered back to the Place de l’Alma and saw hundreds of people gathered there in Princess Diana’s honor. Men and women alike took time out of their day to pay tribute to her with drawn faces and tears in their eyes. The normally beautiful square bordering the glistening Seine rather reflected a melancholic tone today, reminding the people of the world that even the most stunning place can become the sight of pure ruin. I bought a bouquet of flowers and left them in the center of the square as so many before me had done, mesmerized by the fact that less than twelve hours earlier I had been at the same location witnessing the death of one of the most beloved media figures. All around me I saw newsstands, people walking the streets of Paris reading the day’s newspaper while hoping to gain more insight into the previous nights happenings. Televisions in the restaurants I passed all had on the latest broadcast, with reporters giving the most recent information about what really happened in the Alma tunnel. The presence of journalism I saw to be everywhere that day, giving information to the citizens of the world and reflecting back to me the reason why I was in Paris; to pursue my dream of becoming a journalist. Though it was initially disrupted by the devastation that I saw take place the previous night, the power that journalism had in uniting the world in Princess Diana’s honor truly told me that I was in the right place.